A Guidebook
For
Maine
Incarcerated
Veterans

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#### **FORWARD**

This handbook can be an important tool. Review all of the programs thoroughly to understand the opportunities available. When these programs are used properly, the benefits will be a minimization of the outside pressures you may be confronted when released, social acceptance, economics, and re-establishment as a productive member of society.

This booklet is a tool for veterans that are incarcerated and their families, who wish access to services to support a new and better way of life. Be aware, this guidebook is designed to assist veterans incarcerated, in the State of Maine and their families; laws do vary from state to state. Therefore, check your state laws and regulations against this guide.

We would like to recognize and thank: 1) the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans which provided basic concepts and core information for this guide through its "Planning for Your Release" guide funded by the U.S. Department of Labor; 2) the Veterans Incarcerated Workgroup of Walla Walla, Washington, for the concept of state-specific information in its "Guidebook for Incarcerated Veterans" and for allowing the use of its guide as a template for this publication; and 3) Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc. for developing the first incarcerated veterans guidebook, which has inspired and informed subsequent efforts; and 4) any public domain and agency resources included in the guidebook.

Agency staff names and addresses, phone numbers and website addresses change. If you attempt to contact one of the resources in this guidebook and it is not current, do your best to obtain the current information through phone information or a Google web search. To perpetuate the value of this document, we respectfully request that if you discover any incorrect, conflicting, or out-of-date information in this Guidebook please send the discrepancies to:

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#### SECTION I

# **USING THIS GUIDE AND SEEKING HELP**

This guide is for you to use to plan for your release and to keep as a reference after your release. It includes addresses, phone numbers, and web sites that you can use to find out about programs and other help available after your release. You may want to ask a friend or family member to help you find the information you need if you do not have phone or internet access. Keep in mind that **this guide does not include all of the services available**. What is available in one area may be different from what is available in another, so be sure to check with local resources to learn about services in your area.

While you are in prison, find out which unit in your facility can help you plan for your release (often the education or transfer unit). Classes may be offered so you can work on skills development and prepare for life after release. You do not want to risk homelessness once you are released, so take advantage of the opportunities available to you.

Begin thinking about what specifically you will need upon release. Ask yourself these kinds of questions: Will I need housing? Will I need medical, substance abuse, or mental health care? Do I need to learn a job skill? Do I have any other legal issues, such as child support? How do I restart my VA checks or Supplemental Security Income (SSI)?

Make a list of your needs. Remember that this is just a tool to help you get organized. A sample list might look like this:

- I need a place to live.
- I need a job.
- I need clothing to wear to work.
- I need to find out what benefits I can get as veteran.
- I want to get addictions treatment.

I owe child support.

Think about your list as you read through this guide. Who do you think can help you with each of your needs? Is there one organization that may be able to work with you, on many different things, or do you need to contact several agencies? Keep track of the steps you take, including the dates and names of people you contact for information or assistance. Although this guide provides *national and state* addresses for many organizations, we recommend you **check your phone book for local, county, and state agencies that know what help is available in your area.** 

When writing a letter to request information, **be clear.** Keep your letter short, to the point, and write legibly. Include the following information:

- Your name and contact information.
- A brief statement about your current situation.
- Your specific request.
- What you have done so far (Example: I have written to X organization and they suggested I contact you).
- Any restrictions for mailings (Example: Mail with staples or paper clips will not be accepted by my prison facility).

When contacting an agency for help by mail, email or phone, **be persistent and polite** in order to get results. Ask questions if information is not clear to you. Remember that many organizations are staffed by volunteers who are eager to help, but may not have the answers you are looking for. If **someone cannot help you, ask about who can.** 

The Internet can also be helpful to find information about VA benefits and community resources in your area. This guide includes web addresses, when available. If computer access is not available at your facility, you can visit the public library after release.

Computer access may also be provided at Employment Security Commission offices (referred to as One Stop or Unemployment Offices).

Section II of this guide provides information about assistance for specific needs.

**Section III** covers basic information about seeking VA benefits. At the end is a **Checklist** that summarizes each section of this guide.

#### **SECTION II**

#### **HELP FOR VETERANS**

This section includes resources that can help you get back on your feet. Remember to check the phone book for local, county, and state agencies that know what services are available in the area to assist you. Some organizations may have waiting lists, require an interview, or have specific rules about whom they serve. It is best if you **start asking about services and requirements now**, so that you will be prepared when you are released. You may even ask if your name can be put on a waiting list when you get closer to your release date.

#### **TOLL-FREE NUMBERS**

Crisis and other toll-free numbers are often listed in the front cover or first few pages of the phone book. You may also want to check under "Social Services" in the yellow pages for hotlines and local numbers.

- US Department of Veterans Affairs www.va.gov
  - Benefits: 1-800-827-1000,
  - Medical Centers: 1-877-222-8387, or <u>www.visn1.med.va.gov</u>
  - Persian Gulf War Helpline: 1-800-749-8387
- Focus On Recovery Helpline A 24-hour national alcohol and drug abuse addiction and treatment hotline: 1-800-888-9383.
- National AIDS Hotline Talk to someone who knows about HIV / AIDS and can tell you about AIDS services in your city or state: 1-800-822-7422.
- National Coalition for Homeless Veterans 1-800-838-4357 or www.nchv.org,
- National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)
- Maine Bureau of Veterans Services http://www.maine.gov/dvem/bvs/index.htm
- **211 Maine** <u>HTTP://211MAINE.ORG</u> Phone numbers: 2-1-1 OR 1-866-811-5695

#### WHERE TO START

Check the local phone book yellow pages under "Homeless" or "Social Service Organizations" for a list of many local organizations that offer different services, which may include clothing, public transportation tokens, emergency shelter, and more. You may need to contact several agencies to find all the services you need. Services provided by *government* agencies are listed in the blue pages found near the front of the phone book. Check with your local Public Assistance Office to find out what programs are available and what their guidelines are. We have included some guidance below, but your local organizations are your best resources. **Remember, it never hurts to ask!** 

Every VA Medical Center has a Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) Coordinator who is responsible for helping homeless veterans access VA and community-based care to end homelessness among veterans. The HCHV program provides outreach, clinical assessments and referrals for medical and mental health care, long-term transitional residential assistance, case management and employment assistance with linkage to permanent housing. To locate your nearest HCHV Coordinator call 1-877-222-8387 or go to http://www1.va.gov/homeless/page.cfm?pg=21.

- Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office (VARO) provides assistance with Veterans benefits & entitlements information, VA claims process, representation and advocacy, Trauma (PTSD) counseling, Veterans Homes for those in need of nursing care, and employment assistance through federal funded reintegration projects. Call 1-800-827-1000 or go to www.vba.va.gov.
- National Coalition for the Homeless has a directory of shelters and homeless
  assistance programs online. This does not list every program in the country, so
  be sure to check your phone book for local programs. Call 1-800-VET-HELP or go
  to <a href="https://www.nchv.org.">www.nchv.org.</a>
- Salvation Army provides services, including shelter and transitional housing, for homeless individuals and families. To locate services call the Salvation Army USA Eastern Territory at 845-620-7200 or go to <a href="https://www.use.salvationarmy.org">www.use.salvationarmy.org</a>.

- United Way provides a variety of services through local organizations. Check the phone book for a local post or locate local organizations online at www.unitedway.org.
- Local churches and faith-based organizations, such as Catholic Charities,
   Salvation Army, and Volunteers of America, may have a variety of programs to
   assist you. Find these organizations by calling your county Department of Human
   Resources. Check the blue pages of the phone book for the number or look under
   "MAINE STATE OF" in the white pages.
- **211 Maine -** HTTP://211MAINE.ORG; Phone numbers: 2-1-1 OR 1-866-811-5695

#### HOUSING

It is important to know that you have a place to go when released. The first step in returning to the community is finding a place to stay. This section includes ways to locate emergency shelter, transitional programs, and permanent housing assistance. Transitional or temporary housing can serve as a step toward full independence upon your release. However, there are often waiting lists for housing assistance programs, so you should ask about applying as soon as possible. If you are released and find yourself homeless, emergency assistance is available.

# **Emergency and Transitional Housing**

 To find out if there are homeless veteran service providers in your area, call 1-800- VET-HELP, write to NCHV, 333 1/2 Pennsylvania Ave., SE Washington, DC 20003- 1148, or go to <a href="https://www.nchv.org">www.nchv.org</a>.

Look in the phone book **yellow pages** under "Social Service Organizations" for local shelters or organizations that may be able to help.

Look in the phone book **blue pages** under local, city, or county government Department of Social Services or "Human Services" or call the County Commissioner's Office for information about local low-income housing coalitions or homeless advocacy groups who may know what is available. If you do not have blue pages, look under Alabama or the name of the county or city in the white pages.

- To find a list of emergency shelters for men, women and families in every state, check the **Department of Housing and Urban Development** online at www.hud.gov/homeless.
- Shelters in Maine:
  - Community Shelters in Maine: For a full listing go to http://
     Mainehousing.org or call 1-800-452-4668

# Long term or Permanent Housing

Public housing waiting lists can be long, but the length of time can vary from place to place. Even if you are not sure where you want to live yet, apply to get on the waiting list so that you have as many options as possible. To learn how to apply, contact the local housing authority listed in the phone book blue pages under "Local Government, Public Housing Authority" or in the white pages under the name of the city or county.

Other Housing Resources:

#### Preble Street Veterans Housing Services:

Preble Street Veterans Housing Services (VHS) assists low-income veterans and their families to find and maintain stable housing works to end homelessness among veterans throughout Maine.

Telephone 207-956-6556
Toll Free 1-800-377-5709
Fax 207-699-4463
Email vhs@preblestreet.org vhs@preblestreet.org
http://www.preblestreet.org/what-we-do/housing-services/veterans-housing-services/

#### Sober Homes:

The 51 Pleasant Street Project Waterville, Maine Contact: VA Homeless Coordinator 1. 877-222-8387

# Maine State Housing Authorities:

Maine State Housing Authority 353 Water Street Augusta, Maine 04330-4366 1-800-452-4668

Portland Housing Authority 14 Baxter Blvd. Portland, Maine 04101 207-773-4753

Brunswick Housing Authority 12 Stone Street Brunswick, Maine 207-725-8711

#### Oxford County:

Community Concepts Inc. (CCI) P.O. Box 278 16 – 19 Market Square South Paris, Maine 04281 http://community-concepts.org

# Aroostook County

Community Action Program (ACAP) PO Box 1116 444 Main Street Presque Isle, Maine 04769 1-800-432-7881

# Hancock and Washington Counties

Washington-Hancock Community Action Agency (WHCAP) PO Box 280 Corner of Maine and Maple Milbridge, Maine 04658-0280 207-546-7544

#### Kennebec and Somerset Counties

Kennebec Valley Community Action Program (KVCAP) PO Box 1529
101 Water Street
Waterville, Maine 04903
207-873-2122

#### York County

York County Community Action Program PO Box 72 11 Cottage Street Sanford, Maine 04073 207-324-5762

#### FINDING & KEEPING A JOB

Finding a job may be hard and can seem overwhelming, but it is possible and very important! When released you may find that you are completely starting over. You should ask for job counseling and training while incarcerated so you are prepared to work when released. **Do not wait** until you get out to start thinking about what you will do. **Start planning now!** 

# **Employment Services**

#### **Maine Career Center network**

The Bureau of Employment Services provides a variety of employment and training services for Maine workers, businesses, and jobseekers through the **Maine Career Center network**.

- Career Centers provide all the information, technology and services business needs to thrive; and job seekers need to achieve successful careers. They serve special populations such as Veterans Services include:
  - Free use of computers, copiers, phones, faxes and other career resources
  - Self-directed efforts via the Internet
  - Group programs and activities, such as workshops
  - One-on-one consultations
  - Training programs and business consultations
  - Self-service resource rooms and job search activities.

# Local Veterans Employment Representatives and Disable Veterans Outreach Program

Local Veterans Employment Representatives (LVER) and Disabled Veterans Outreach Program (DVOP) specialist are assigned by the State Department of Labor to help Veterans find and keep jobs.

- DVOPs counsel veterans in all aspects of job search and career development.
- LVERs work with employers to facilitate employment opportunities for veterans.
- The State of Maine has 23 One-Stop Career Centers that assist job seekers in finding employment.

 The Career Center hotline number is 1-888-457-8883, online at http://www.mainecareercenter.com/.
 Bureau of Employment Services
 Maine Department of Labor
 55 State House Station
 Augusta, Maine 04333

## **Work Opportunity Tax Credit**

The Work Opportunity Tax Credit (WOTC) is a federal tax credit that offers an incentive for private sector businesses to hire individuals from targeted groups such as Veterans and Felons that have consistently faced significant barriers to employment.

#### Employers can:

- Can reduce their federal tax liability by as much as \$9,600 on new hires
- Make the hiring decision
- Complete minimal paperwork to claim the tax credit
- Can hire as many new qualifying individuals as they choose

Timely filing is imperative for WOTC! IRS Form 8850 along with ETA Form 9061 must be mailed to the Maine Department of Labor no later than the 28th calendar day following the new employee's employment start date. (When the 28th calendar day lands on a Saturday, Sunday or holiday, the next succeeding business day will be treated as the last day of the period.)

To find out more about the Work Opportunity Tax Credit, visit the U.S. Department of Labor website (http://www.dol.gov/vets/programs/hvrp/) or contact your local Career Center.

#### Bonding Program:

Purpose—Bonding is a unique and innovative tool for marketing an applicant to an employer. As an employer incentive, it conveys a businesslike approach. The employer gets the worker's skills, abilities and knowledge without taking risk potential employee dishonesty. There are no forms or other papers for the employer to sign, and no processing to delay matters – the insurance can be put into effect instantly. The bond insurance can apply to any job and covers any employee dishonesty that occurs on or away from the employer's work facility. Full or part-time employees' paid wages (with federal taxes automatically deducted from pay) can be bonded; these Fidelity Bonds cannot cover self-employment.

#### Other Programs:

- Homeless Veterans' Reintegration Projects (HVRP). HVRP assists veterans with
  job search preparation, vocational counseling, occupational skills training, on-the-job
  training, trade skills certification and licensing, and job placement assistance and
  referral to supportive services. To find out if you may be eligible and how to access
  HVRP, contact the Maine VA HCHV Homeless Program 207-623-8411 or toll free
  1-877-222-8387.
- The Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program was established in 2011 to promote housing stability among homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. Under the SSVF program, VA awards grants to private non-profit organizations and consumer cooperatives that can provide a range of supportive services to eligible very low-income Veteran families. Services include outreach, case management, assistance in obtaining VA benefits, and help in accessing and coordinating other public benefits. SSVF grantees can also make time-limited temporary payments on behalf of Veterans to cover rent, utilities, security deposits and moving costs.
- The VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment services help veterans with service-connected disabilities by providing job training and counseling to those who have an employment handicap. Services include help finding a job, on-the-job training, job development, and vocational training. If you are not eligible for these services, a VA counselor may help you find other options, goals, or programs. Contact your VA Regional Office (VARO) at 1-800-827-1000, or go to <a href="http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/">http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/vre/</a>.
- Through its Compensated Work Therapy (CWT) programs, the VA offers structured work opportunities at-risk and homeless veterans with physical, mental health and addictions problems. The CWT program partners the public sector for work by these veterans, who learn job skills, re-learn successful work habits, and regain a sense of self-esteem. Veterans are paid for their work and given assistance with employment in the community. For further information go to http://www.va.gov/HEALTH/cwt/veterans.asp
- Maine veterans receive veterans' preference for open competitive civil service exams, receive extra points for promotional exams, and are placed at the top of the registry for labor service. Veterans who are employed by state government may be eligible to buy back up to four years of active service.
- Veterans receive special assistance in their job search through the VETS (Veterans Employment & Training Services) program available http://www.dol.gov/vets/

#### **HEALTH CARE**

### If eligible for veteran's benefits:

We encourage you to enroll in the VA Health Benefits System prior to your release by filling out a 10-10 EZ. This form can be filled out online or downloaded, filled out and mailed to:

VA Maine Health Care System Attention Eligibility 1 VA Center Augusta, Maine 04330

Most VA Medical Centers have a Health Care for Homeless Veterans Coordinator who helps veterans and their families find resources inside and outside the VA Health Care system. Call 1-877-222-8387 or got to <a href="https://www.visn1.med.va.gov">www.visn1.med.va.gov</a>, to find the medical center nearest you.

General Information and programs available at the Togus VAMC, Maine that may be helpful for you: Key phone numbers and addresses are listed below:

The Togus Veterans Affairs Medical Center & Togus Regional Benefit Office is a 67operating bed facility with general medical, surgical, intermediate and mental health beds.

Department of Veteran Affairs Togus Regional Office 1 VA Center, Bldg. 248 (402/21) Augusta, Maine 04330-6795 1-800-827-1000 Department of Veterans Affairs Togus VA Medical Center 1 VA Center Augusta, Maine 04330 1-877-421-8263

#### **Benefit Services**

The Togus Veterans Service Center provides benefits, information and services to veterans and their families. These services include compensation, pension and education application processing, vocational rehabilitation and counseling, and information about home loans and death benefits.

Chemical Dependency Recovery Program (CDRP)
 This is a 4 week intensive out-patient program for those veterans seeking help for substance abuse and/or chemical dependency. Call 207-623-8411 and ask to speak to someone in the addictions services/substance abuse.

# Mental Health Services

Walk-in or appointments available, Mon. through Fri. 9am to 3:30pm. Call 207-623-8411 and request to speak to someone who schedules Mental Health appointments.

#### **Telecare Services**

A telephone Healthcare Advice Program for veterans in Maine. Call TELECARE first before making a trip to the Medical Center if you have questions regarding your healthcare needs, including advice and information, medication information and appointment information.

# **Eligibility**

In general, veterans who have an honorable or general discharge from the military meet the minimum active duty time requirements and who are homeless or in need of stable housing are eligible for Health Care for Homeless Veterans (HCHV) services.

If ineligible for veteran's benefits, free or low-cost health care may be available from the following sources:

- Department of Human Resources (DHR) can tell you where to find health care
  facilities for the homeless. Ask to speak with the intake worker. Check the phone
  book blue pages or white pages under state or county government for the
  number.
- National Health Care for the Homeless Council has a list of health care providers
  working with homeless people across the nation. For a list of providers in your
  state, go to <a href="https://www.nhchc.org">www.nhchc.org</a>.
- Many local organizations and communities run free clinics. Look in the
  phone book blue pages under "Public Health" to contact local government office
  or white pages under name of county for clinics in your area.
- Special Health Information for Veterans: If you think you may be at risk for AIDS and HIV infection after your release, contact the nearest VA Medical Center to be tested, and seek counseling. Those at highest risk for AIDS and HIV infection are:
  - people who share needles or syringes to inject drugs or steroids;
  - men who have sex with other men;

- those born to mothers who have HIV
- people who received blood transfusions before 1985; and
- anyone who has sex with anyone who is at risk for HIV/AIDS.

- Additional Special Health Information for Veterans: Veterans, homeless, and incarcerated people are at high risk for Hepatitis C (HCV), a serious disease that can cause cirrhosis (scarring of the liver) and liver cancer. If you think you are at risk after your release, contact the nearest VA Medical Center to be tested and seek HCV counseling. You are at risk if:
  - You ever used a needle to inject drugs;
  - you had a blood transfusion or organ transplant before 1992;
  - you were a health care worker and had contact with blood;
  - · you were on long-term kidney dialysis; or
  - your mother had Hepatitis C when she gave birth to you.

The Veterans Health Administration also recommends testing if:

- you are a Vietnam-era veteran;
- you have had exposure to blood on your skin;
- you have had multiple sex partners;
- you have tattoos or body piercing;
- you have ever snorted cocaine;
- you have liver disease or have had an abnormal liver function test
- you have a history of drinking a lot of alcohol.

# **MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

# If eligible for veterans' benefits:

Contact the Homeless Veteran Services Coordinator at the local VA Medical
 Center or Vet Center. Call 1-877-222-8387 to or go to www.visn1 .med.va.gov, to find the medical center nearest you.

- National Alliance for the Mentally III lists community mental health services providers at: www.nami.org, or call 1-800-950-6264.
- National Mental Health Association offers support groups, rehabilitation, socialization, and housing services through 340 community organizations located across the country. Call 1-800-969-NMHA, or find a local office online at www.nmha.org.

#### SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT

If eligible for veterans' benefits:

Contact the local **VA Medical Center**. Call 1-800-827-1000 to or go to <a href="www.visn1">www.visn1</a> <a href="https://www.visn1">.med.va.gov</a>, to find the medical center nearest you.

If not eligible for veterans' benefits, the following sources may be able to tell you where you can go to get help:

- The Department of Health and Human Services Drug and Alcohol Treatment
   Referral Routing Service can refer you to local programs. Call 1-800-662-4357.
- Focus On Recovery Helpline A 24-hour national alcohol and drug abuse addiction and treatment hotline: 1-800-888-9383.

#### FINANCIAL HELP

- The American Legion provides **Temporary Financial Assistance**, (TFA) from its national headquarters to help maintain a stable environment for <u>children of veterans</u>.
   To obtain an application, look in the phone book to contact a local post, or contact the National Headquarters <u>www.legion.org</u> to find the post nearest you.
- If you are unemployed with little or no income, you may be able to get **food stamps**. A person may normally qualify for \$85 to \$100 worth of food stamps per month. Call the toll-free information number at 1-800-221-5689.

- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits can be applied for <u>before</u> your release, even though you won't receive the benefits until after you are released. Normally, it takes about three months to review an application, so apply well before your release date. It is best to get help filling out the application. For detailed information or assistance, call 1-800- 772-1213, call or your local Social Security Administration office listed in the phone book blue pages or white pages, or go to: <a href="http://www.ssa.gov/notices/supplemental-security-income/">http://www.ssa.gov/notices/supplemental-security-income/</a>.
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) has a program called Emergency Food and Shelter Program to help prevent homelessness. Contact the local Office of the Mayor or United Way to ask who awards this money in your area and what the rules are.

#### **LEGAL HELP**

You should talk to a **Veterans Advocate Service Officer** for help with discharge upgrades, seeking benefits, and filing a VA claim (call 1-800-562-2308 for the nearest Service Officer).

# Legal Assistance:

Pine Tree Legal Assistance is a non-profit corporation providing legal assistance to people whose income is 125 percent of the federal income poverty guidelines or less. It also has developed and maintains the HelpMeLaw web site <a href="www.helpmelaw.org">(www.helpmelaw.org)</a> Pine Tree Legal can also be located at <a href="http://ptla.org/">http://ptla.org/</a> which lists other organizations in Maine that offer legal information and assistance. Contact:

Pine Tree Legal Assistance 39 Green St. P.O. Box 2429 Augusta, Maine 04338 207-622-4731

# Other Legal Help:

- Maine State Bar Association <a href="http://www.mainebar.org">http://www.mainebar.org</a>
   Lawyer Referral Service 1-800-860-1460
   Irs@mainebar.org
  - Most law is state-specific. Most common legal problems are governed by the law
    in the state where you live or where the problem occurred. When looking for
    legal help, make sure that information you find applies to your state, or that the
    lawyer or other service provider is qualified to work in your state.
  - The American Bar Association has a web site with guidelines about free legal services and links to directories of legal aid offices and pro-bono programs. Go to: <a href="https://www.abanet.org">www.abanet.org</a>
- Pine Tree Legal Assistance has an online list of organizations across the nation that provides free legal help to clients who qualify. Go to www.ptla.org/links/services.htm.

# **WOMEN VETERANS**

- Most VA Medical Centers and readjustment offices have a designated Women
   Veterans Coordinator to assist women veterans in accessing VA benefit programs
   and healthcare services. Call 1-877-222-8387 or go to <a href="www.visn1.med.va.gov">www.visn1.med.va.gov</a>, to
   find the medical center nearest you.
- The Department of Veterans Affairs has a designated Women Veterans
   Coordinator at each VAMC.

#### SECTION III

# **SEEKING FEDERAL BENEFITS**

The Department of Veterans Affairs publishes a booklet called "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Their Dependents" that describes the types of benefits available and lists the addresses and phone numbers for VA facilities nationwide. Write the VA Regional Office (VARO) to request a copy.

# U.S. Department Of Veterans Affairs - Regional Office

VBA Dept.

One Togus Center

Togus, Maine 04330

Call 1-800-827-1000 or find information about benefits at www.vba.va.gov.

#### ELIGIBILITY FOR VA BENEFITS DURING INCARCERATION

Veterans incarcerated and incarcerated dependents may apply for the same compensation, dependency and indemnity compensation (DIC) – service connected death benefits and pension benefits as veterans who are not incarcerated. However, Congress restricts the amount of benefits that may be paid to a veteran or dependent while he or she is incarcerated. These benefits are institutionalized as part of law: 38 U.S.C Sec 5313 (a), 38 C.F.R., Sec. 3.665 (a), (d), which reads as follows:

If a veteran is incarcerated as the result of a "felony" conviction as defined by law: "Any offense punishable by death or imprisonment for a term exceeding one year, unless specifically categorized as a misdemeanor under the law of the prosecuting jurisdiction."

Then, the amount paid to a veteran incarcerated for a service-connected disability is generally limited by law to the 10 percent disability rate, or half the amount of the ten percent rate if the veteran's disability rating is 10 percent. (If the veteran is rated before incarceration as 20 percent disabled or higher, he will receive only the amount payable to a 10 percent disabled veteran.) Incarcerated DIC recipients will receive one-half the amount paid to a veteran receiving compensation payments for a 10 percent-rated disability.

A veteran may not receive non-service connected VA pension benefits, or any portion of these benefits, while incarcerated for a felony or misdemeanor. However, his family may receive an apportionment of such benefits under the procedure described above. (See 38 C.F.R. Sec.3.666)

One important requirement for eligibility for VA benefits is that the veteran has to have been issued either an honorable or general discharge, or would have received one if not for re- enlisting. If a veteran had two periods of service, one honorable and the other less than honorable, he may still be eligible for VA benefits based on the honorable period of service.

VA Medical Care cannot be provided to veterans in prison, but VA health facilities may provide care to you after your release. Contact 1-877-222-8387 to find the medical center nearest you.

#### BENEFITS PAYMENTS WHILE INCARCERATED

There is a 60-day "grace period" following a conviction when you may still receive full benefits. To avoid an overpayment, it is important that you notify the VARO immediately when you go to prison if you are receiving payments. If you do not notify the VA and receive overpayment, you and your family will lose all financial payments until the debt is paid.

For example, Joe is a veteran who receives a VA pension. He commits a crime, is convicted, and is incarcerated, but doesn't tell the VA right away and keeps getting paid for 6 months. After serving his sentence of 18 months, he is released and applies to the VA to have his pension restarted. He will have an overpayment which must be recovered from the restarted benefits. Until the overpayment is recovered, Joe will have to go without that income.

Your award for compensation or pension benefits should resume from the date you are released, as long as the VA receives notice of release within one year. Form 21-4193, Notice to Department of Veterans Affairs of Veteran or Beneficiary Incarcerated in Penal Institution, available through your counselors should be completed before release, signed by a prison official and submitted to VA Benefits Administration.

#### **APPORTIONMENT**

Although legally, the veteran can only receive a portion of the full amount payable for his or her disability rating, the remaining balance may be "apportioned to the individual's dependent family". To apply for apportionment, the veteran must send a letter that identifies the veteran and the apportionment claimant and makes it clear they are requesting an apportionment of his VA benefits to the VA Regional Office (VARO) that has jurisdiction over the veteran's case. VA regulations clearly specify this apportionment amount will only go to family members if they can show financial need for such amount. This applies to the spouse, children, or dependent parents who are involved in the application.

In deciding whether any apportionment is appropriate, the amount of the apportionment, and to whom it will go, the following factors are considered:

- The family member's income and living expenses;
- The amount of compensation available to be apportioned;
- The needs and living expenses of other family members; and
- Special needs of any of the family members.

For example: a veteran incarcerated rated as 80 percent disability can only receive the amount he or she would get if he or she were 10 percent disabled. However, his or her family may be apportioned up to 70 percent, the difference of the 80 percent rating. (DIC may also be apportioned with similar restrictions.)

There is a 60-day "grace period" following conviction where the veteran, or Dependency or Indemnity Compensation (DIC) recipient, may still receive full benefits. If the veteran continues to receive benefits after the 60-day period, it will result in an "overpayment". The VA considers it to be the recipient's responsibility and fault if this occurs because the recipient failed to notify the VA of his or her incarceration. Attempts to obtain a waiver in these situations of overpayment are often unsuccessful. As a rule, the veteran loses most, if not all, financial benefits until the

VA recovers the entire overpayment. It has also been a standard procedure that the family will not be entitled to receive an apportionment until the debt is completely recovered.

For more information concerning VA debt collection rules that may affect the veteran incarcerated, telephone: 1-800-827-1000 and request a Veterans Service Organization representative or, write to a Veterans Service Organization.

One other relevant restriction on veteran's incarcerated eligibility for service connected disability compensation is that: "No total disability rating based on un-employability, may be assigned to an incarcerated veteran".

It is important to remember that most VA decisions, including those on apportionment, can be appealed to the Board of Veterans Appeals and, if need be, to the Court of Appeal for Veterans Affairs.

# **Re-starting Benefits at Release:**

It is important that each disabled veteran receiving compensation or DIC payments promptly notify the VARO. Regular full benefit payments should begin upon release, providing the VA is notified of the veteran's release, including placement within a community treatment center or halfway house in the community, within one year of release. VARO needs formal notification from the prison of your release in order to restart benefits: The sooner that document is provided to VARO, the sooner VARO can begin to process your request.

#### **SEEKING HELP AFTER RELEASE**

If you would like to get benefits or think you have a pending claim before the VA, it is best to get professional help to assist you.

Many Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) have trained staff who can help you with your VA claim, and can legally represent your claim before the VA. Some also help homeless and at-risk veterans find the support services they need. You can contact any VSO listed in the Guidebook to learn an office near you.

# **Seeking Benefits On Your Own:**

Although we encourage you to seek the aid of a service representative, you may choose to apply for VA benefits on your own. Write your local VA Regional Office or find the forms online at: <a href="https://www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms1.htm">www.vba.va.gov/pubs/forms1.htm</a>. You can also apply for certain benefits online at: <a href="http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp">http://vabenefits.vba.va.gov/vonapp/main.asp</a>.

Below are brief descriptions of forms needed to file for certain VA benefits. Be sure you use a return address where mail will get to you as quickly as possible. Make photocopies of all forms for your records before sending your packet to the VARO nearest you.

- VA Form 21-526 Application for Compensation or Pension- must be filed to apply for compensation or pension. Mail your DD-214 and the following forms to the VARO nearest your release destination 30 to 45 days before your release.
- VA Form 21-4138 Statement in Support of Claim lets you explain why you deserve the benefits you are asking for because of your disability or disorder. It is best to have an experienced service representative help you complete the form.
- VA Form 21-4142 Authorization for Release of Information If you have received medical
  or mental health care, that may be relevant to your claim, from anyone other than a VA
  Medical Facility, you need to fill out a VAF 21-4142 giving permission for release of medical
  records to the VA.
- VA Form 10-10EZ Enrollment for Medical Benefits is used by the VA to determine if you
  can receive medical benefits. Complete the form and bring it with you to the VA medical
  facility where you will seek evaluation for treatment.
- VA Form 28-1900 Vocational Rehabilitation for Disabled Veterans is needed to apply for the vocational rehabilitation program to help veterans who were disabled during their service reach maximum independence in daily living, to learn the skills needed to get a job, and to find and keep a job. Send Form 28-1900 to the VARO in your area 10 to 15 days before your release.
- VA Form 70-3288 Request for and Consent to Release of Information from Claimant's

Records - is used to get records relevant to your claim from VA facilities (regional offices, medical centers, outpatient clinics, and vet centers). Request a fee waiver under section 38 C.F.R. Sec.1.526 (h), which requires the VARO to provide a veteran with one set of his or her records free of charge.

#### CHECKLIST

# **Using This Guide**

- Ask about classes or resources to help you plan for your release.
- Make a list of your needs.
- Make a list of who may be able to help you.
- Write letters and/or contact organizations by phone or email.
- Write down the steps you take so that you do not repeat them.

#### **Just for Veterans**

- Know where to call toll-free for help.
- Contact organizations about what services they have to offer.
- Think about your housing needs and gather information about what is available locally.
- Learn about job resources and create a plan to find a job.
- Learn about health issues, and what services are available.
- Learn about the resources available for substance abuse and mental health treatment in your area.
- Learn about your options to get financial help.
- Begin to take care of other legal issues.
- Learn about homeless veterans services.
- Learn about resources for women veterans
- If you are not currently receiving benefits, find out if you can or should be.
- If you are receiving benefits, notify the VA when you go to prison to avoid an overpayment.
- Contact a veteran service representative to represent you and help you file a claim.

•	Apply for apportionment so that some of the money withheld may be given to eligible family members.

# RESOURCE ADDRESSES/SITES

US Dept. of Veterans Affairs (USDVA):

http://www.va.gov

Benefits: 1-800-827-1000

Health Care: 1-877-222-VETS (8387)

- The United States Social Security Administration: <a href="www.ssa.gov">www.ssa.gov</a>
- National Coalition for Homeless Veterans http:// www.nchv.org/index.cfm
- VA New England Health Care System –VISN 1 http://www.newengland.va.gov
- Maine Bureau of Veterans' Services http://www.mainebvs.org